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ABSTRACT

The process by which women successfully attained male-dominated administrative line positions as high school principals and superintendents and their perceptions of the process are examined in this descriptive study. The qualitative, inductive analysis is based on indepth interviews with 17 women principals and superintendents. Findings indicate two patterns of perceptions with different behavioral consequences: (1) "Work hard, be loyal and you will be rewarded"; and (2) "Work hard, work smart and make it happen". The perceptions held by each group had different behavioral consequences, especially for their interactions with men, views of gender discrimination, and advocacy of other females. Women in the first group (10) generally refrained from active female advocacy, discounted the presence of sex discrimination, and did not initially seek administrative careers. The second group (seven) tended to vigorously advocate other females, recognized gender discrimination, and initially aspired to careers in educational administration. Women striving to administrative positions decry the perceived lack of mutual female support. Given the larger number of women who hold the first viewpoint, their perceptions may not be surprising. (25 references) (LMI)

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GROUNDBREAKERS: FEMALES WHO "SUCCEED" IN MALE-DOMINATED LINE ADMINISTRATIVE POSITIONS

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The continued absence of females from line administrative positions in the nation's schools (NEA, 1973; NCES, 1977; Jones and Montenegro, 1982; McCarthy and Zent, 1982; Ortiz, 1982; Mertz and NcNeely, 1988a; Mertz, Venditti and McNeely, 1988) and the persistent barriers to their advancement in such positions (Schmuck, 1975; Valverde, 1980; Adkison, 1981; Jones and Montenegro, 1983; Lyman and Speizer, 1980; Shakeshaft, 1987; Edson, 1988) have been well-documented. That women want to be administrators and that they are preparing themselves for administrative positions is also well-established (Diaz, 1976; Ortiz and Corvell, 1978; NCES, 1977; Pavan, 1985; Edson, 1988). Line administrative positions have long and traditionally been held by males and they continue to dominate such positions.

Females are gradually moving into line positions (McCarthy and Zent, 1981; Mertz and McNeely, 1988a; Mertz, Venditti and McNeely, 1988). Nevertheless, few females hold such positions and in particular, the positions of high school principal and school superintendent. These two positions have been particularly resistent to the advancement efforts of females (Jones and Montenegro, 1985; Cunningham and Hentges, 1984; Mertz and McNeely, 1988b, 1989).

In the face of these "realities," Adkison (1981), Larwood and

Lockheed (1979), and Larwood, Wood and Inderlied (1978), have called for in-depth, longitudinal studies which would examine individual females over a span of time - to learn what had happened to them, the strategies they had used (or tried; and the effect of those strategies), and the relationship between the strategies used and the situation. Edson (1988) undertook this challenge in her study of 142 women in the United States who were "actively pursuing administrative careers" (3). Moved by their persistence despite the barriers, Edson examined why the aspirants wanted to be administrators (motivation) and their career progress, i.e., what happened to them between the time of initial contact in 1979+ and an update in 1984+. The stories of these females are reported in rich detail, and at the time of the update, one-third had ascended to principalships (Edson, 1987, 267). While much can be learned from the experiences of the females reported by Edson, of the aspirants who had succeeded in achieving principalships, none were secondary principals, middle or high school, although 9 had become assistant principals, and none held a superintendency. That does not mean that these females will not (may not) seek such positions, rather that they had not yet achieved them. And, as noted, these positions are particularly resistent to the advancement of females.

Notwithstanding the valuable information provided by the respondents in Edson's study, there is a need for more and for complementary information about how females who successfully

manage the task of breaking through the barriers to their advancement do it, particularly in positions which are most resistent to such advances. We need to learn from these trailblazers; how they did it and how they see it. Such information is interesting and relevant on its own merits. It is also crucial for informing others who aspire to such positions.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study was to examine how females who had been successful in attaining positions as high school principals and superintendents accomplished that task. The study focused on learning how they went about the process, what happened as they did, how they perceived they had accomplished it, and how they saw themselves vis a vis their groundbreaking function.

DESIGN AND PROCEDURES

The study was descriptive and qualitative in design, and concentrated on female superintendents and high school principals in one state, Tennessee (n=20). Following the advice of Harre and Secord (1972) that "the things people say about themselves and other people should be taken seriously as reports of data relevant to phenomena that really exist and which are relevant to the explanation of behavior (7)," and in order for the "female voice to be heard," as argued by Shakeshaft and Novell (1984, 200), intensive interviews were held with 6 of the 8 female superintendents and 11 of the 12 high school principals in the

state. The interviews involved open-ended questions about how they came to hold the position, what they had done to get it (preparation, strategies, experiences), and who or what had helped them in securing the position. The interviews were supplemented with survey forms providing demographic and professional data. While demographic data was provided by all 20 possible subjects, despite repeated attempts to reach them by phone and letter, 2 superintendents and 1 principal could not be interviewed.

The data were analyzed inductively to identify the patterns related to the purposes of the study. The study generated rich data. The stories groundbreakers told were by turns sad, funny, poignant and frustrating, but at the same time rich in experiences and vicarious learnings. For the most part, the subjects were candid in their revelations, and they shared intimate feelings as well as the facts of the case as they saw them.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Subjects

The 8 female superintendents constitute just under 6% of the superintendents in the State. One aspect of the position of superintendent needs clarification. Along with 6 other southern states, Tennessee has both elected and appointed superintendents.

Elected superintendents are characteristic of county school systems; appointed are characteristic of city and special school district systems. Clearly, the dynamics of gaining an elected superintendency are different from those related to attaining an appointed superintendency. Both rely on "politics," but the politics of each situation are somewhat different, the efforts are played out in different political/social arenas, and the role played by professional competence and experience is also somewhat different.

In the study, 6 of the 8 superintendents were elected. Only 2 were appointed, and both were appointed in elementary school districts, i.e., K-6. Further, all of the superintendents, elected and appointed, held their positions in rural, relatively small school systems with student populations ranging from a low of 475 pupils to a high of 9600 pupils. Five were native to the county in which they now served as superintendent. Of the 3 who were not native, 2 were from out-of-state.

The average age of the 8 superintendents was 42.75 years (range: 37-51). Three of them held doctorates, 1 an educational specialist degree, and 3 held master's degrees. One superintendent had never been a classroom teacher, although she had been a special service provider in schools for 13 years. The other 7 superintendents had been classroom teachers for an average of 8.3 years (range: 3 to 20 years). All of the

superintendents had had administrative experience before becoming superintendent, with an average of 5.25 years in administration (range: 1-15 years). Two of them had gone from the classroom to a supervisory position in central office to the superintendency. Two more had gone from the classroom to central office to an elementary principalship to the superintendency. The remaining 4 had gone from the classroom to a principalship or assistant principalship to the superintendency. The 8 superintendents had served an average of 3.6 years in the position (range: 1 to 12), however, 5 of the 8 had served 2 or fewer years.

The 12 female high school principals in the study constitute 3.6% of persons holding that position in the State. Five served in 3 large, urban school districts,(3 in one of these districts; 1 each in the other 2 districts). Six served in 6 different rural school districts. One served in a medium-city school district. Five of the 12 were native to the county in which they now served. Of the 7 who were not native, 4 were from out-of-state. The average age of the 12 principals was 47.4 years (range: 39 to 53), which means they were older (on average) than the superintendents studied. They were similar to the superintendents in their educational profile. Five held doctorates, 1 an educational specialist degree, and 6 held master's degrees. All 12 had had classroom teaching experience for an average of 11.1 years (range: 3 to 18).

All of the principals had had an average of 6.4 years (range: 2 to 12) of previous administrative experience. The career paths of the principals were more varied than those of the superintendents. Two went from the classroom to central office to the principalship. One went from the classroom to the library to the principalship. Nine held a variety of principalships and assistant principalships before becoming high school principals. The 12 principals had served an average of 5 years (range: 2 to 10) as high school principal.

The female superintendents and high school principals studied were similar, in experience, education and background. The professional profile they presented was that of a competent professional, prepared, experienced and qualified for the position they held. Many of them knew each other from meetings around the state, and the paucity of their number made them visible at such meetings.

The Patterns

Each subject had a story to tell, and each story was in some ways unique to the person and the situation. Nevertheless, in listening to the "voices" of these women as they reported the way they had perceived themselves and the situations they faced, two different patterns emerged from the data about how they had attained their positions. The patterns accounted for all of the subjects and transcended their position as superintendent or high

school principal.

The first pattern might aptly be called, work hard, be loyal and you will be rewarded. Ten of the 16 subjects interviewed believed they had gotten the position through their loyalty and dedication to the system, their hard work over a long period of time, and their willingness to do whatever jobs and tasks were assigned to them. They perceived that those factors allowed them to become visible. As one subject reflected, "I had a high level of visibility. I did whatever I was asked to do and I gave it all I had." Another, "It just happened. I always saw a need to put forth my best efforts, and I worked really hard." They believed that their hard work and loyalty had been recognized by the system and had resulted in the position they now held. As one subject reflected, "I got it by working myself to death. It was not a pleasure trip. I am a professional educator and I was overlooked for a long time. Then God opened the door." The females who exhibited this pattern all had substantial records of service and commitment to their school system and they were very much "known quantities" in the district and the community.

Most of these subjects said they had not set out to become administrators. They reported that they had not gotten administrative certification in order to get an administrative position, but rather to further their education. Administrative training was available and fit into a program of graduate study.

After becoming certified, they tended not to seek out administrative positions, but rather to wait for positions to come to them, i.e., to be asked to apply; to be an obvious choice, before applying. One subject, explaining why she had not sought out the principalship, reported, "I never thought I had a chance. I never thought about it because no women were high school principals." Another explained, "I was just a home town girl and I fell into the job. My students' parents called and asked me to apply. And so I did."

Even when they were the logical choice for a position and were passed over in favor of a male, even a less qualified one, they tended to accept the situation. They did not complain or threaten or show their disappointment in any way within the school context. One subject reported,

> I had twenty plus years in the community and had been assistant principal for eleven years at the high school and three years at the junior high school. Word got around. I had the reputation as a hard worker and a caring person. I was recommended for a high school principalship. They said I was not ready. A high school principal was retiring and he recommended me to the area supervisor. They said the school was not ready. It was only after being pushed by a female area superintendent that I got the job.

A subject explained that when another assistant principal was brought in and given her responsibilities, she told the principal, "I'm here. I'm your assistant. Assign me to anything." She continued, "I was seen as loyal and cooperative." Indeed, as they spoke about these events, none indicated they had been

angry at being passed over. If they had been, they kept it to themselves.

A number of these females identified people who had assisted them in attaining their positions, but none said that she had had a mentor. They named principals, area supervisors, board members, and parents as helpful to them.

The ten females, who attributed their success to what we have termed a work hard, be loyal and you will be rewarded perception of success, also held highly similar views about females in administration, discrimination and their status as females in male-dominated positions. To a person they defined themselves by their position not their gender. Most spoke of themselves as "like" their male counterparts, not different from them, and considered themselves to be part of the group,"one of the boys," so to speak. They recognized that they were rare in the position, and that there may have been some discomfort when they first joined with their male counterparts, but they believed that now they "really fit in." As one subject offered, "I'm one of the group." Far from being advocates for females in administration, several took the position that they avoided doing things which would make them seem like advocates for females.

While not denying the existence of discrimination against females, they felt that it was not an important factor. They

argued that if you worked hard and demonstrated loyalty any person could succeed. They offered themselves as evidence that this was so. One subject shared, "I had to work hard and there were times when men with less experience were given positions over me, but I believe that I'm well-accepted and part of the system. And women who work hard are not hindered in administrative advancement." Another argued, "There is no discrimination in being female. I find none. All of the male principals are very supportive."

As may not be surprising, none of the subjects in this category spoke about helping other females to advance or suggested any need to do so. From their perspective, this wasn't necessary. And, as noted earlier, they avoided situations and circumstances in which they might be seen as advocates of females.

The second pattern that emerged from the data was entirely different from the first and might appropriately be called, work hard, work smart and make it happen. Seven females were representative of this pattern. They actively sought to get ahead in administration and saw what they did or did not do as critical to their success. They were neither oblivious to nor naive about the barriers to the advancement of females in administration. They recognized it would be difficult for them to advance because they were female, but they were determined to overcome any barriers they faced.

They wanted to be administrators, decided to be administrators, and went about the process of doing the things they perceived as necessary to achieving that end. They undertook their advanced studies with an eye to preparing themselves for administrative positions and they indicated they did everything they could think of to do to make themselves visible: identified their interest, applied for open positions, were actively involved, and got as much experience and exposure as they could in as many areas as they could. And they were most persistent. As one subject asserted,

> After having been certified, I applied for the very first job available. I didn't get it and I was disheartened. Thereafter I applied for every job that came open as long as I was capable of doing it, even if I didn't have a chance of getting it. It was good experience (interviewing) and it kept me visible.

Another said, "I applied for every assistant principal position in the district." Another, "When I came back (from taking a graduate degree) the system had an administrative intern program. I asked to become an intern. They refused. I said I was leaving. They made me an intern."

These females were confident about their ability to do the job. They felt they possessed the requisite skills and competencies and just needed the job to prove it. They believed that hard work was vital to their success, "I worked longer, harder and tried to do better than anyone else," but not the sole or most important

ingredient. One subject admonished, "They say as long as you do a good job you get rewarded. That is not true. But you can do it, whatever you want to do." Another confided, "I got the itch. I knew I could do the job and I wanted to try." Another, "I looked around early on and saw what the men administrators were doing and said, 'I can do that'."

As might be expected, the subjects who demonstrated the work hard, work smart and make it happen pattern tended to be more assertive in their behavior than those in the first pattern and far less accepting of defeat. And while there were considerable differences in personality and manner among them, they had more confidence in themselves and their abilities than they did in good fortune or reward for service. One subject argued, "There's no such thing as luck, that's when opportunity and preparation meet each other. The only luck is having a position come open." Another, "I'm not a good bureaucrat. I've been around and I have a reputation as honest. I don't take any crap and I don't start a war I can't finish. If I start I go for the jugular."

A number of these females identified people who had assisted and been supportive of them as they sought administrative positions. One subject cited her husband, one cited a male superintendent, and several identified other women who had constituted a support network. Only one subject said that she had had a mentor, and that mentor was a female assistant principal with whom she had

worked, who had delayed her own retirement to enhance the likelihood that the subject would get the appointment. The rest of the subjects denied having had a mentor or sponsor.

Following the work hard, work smart and make it happen game plan seemed to work for some of the subjects in this group (4), i.e., circumstances led to their making it into the position they sought, but for others (3) it was not happening. Both sets of individuals faced barriers, worked hard and smart, as they saw it, but for one set it appeared to work, and for the other it did not. With this latter group, when it did not work, and they felt it might never work, the individuals threatened or took legal action. While they got the position for which they threatened action, they are paying a price for their actions. None now hold the exact position for which they took action. They have been moved to other, similar, less desirable positions, or removed from the position. And they perceive themselves to be at a dead end, i.e., they will not be able to move from that position in their system. One subject changed the scenario somewhat by running for and winning the position of elected superintendent in the district, a position she now holds tenuously.

Thus both the actions and the consequences for each set within this pattern were significantly different. By self-report, those who did not have to or perceive themselves as having to take "the last step," by taking legal action, (perceived as going "outside

the system,") to get their positions were seen much differently than those who saw themselves as having to take "the last step." The females who didn't take the last step, even where they are perceived as aggressive (a pejorative term used by establishment administrators, usually males, for referring to aspiring female administrators, as in the "I go for the jugular" female administrator), were perceived as playing "by the rules," i.e., staying within the system; using the established methods, covert and overt, for getting a position. They were perceived as having earned their position without doing violence to the way you "should" go about it. They didn't out and out break the rules, even where they may have pushed them a bit. So, as one subject put it, "I may not fit in with the 'good old boys,' but I am not viewed as threatening to them or outside the system." They are perceived as having worked "smart," as being savvy, and of knowing "how to do things," all of which enhance the perception that they are competent and professional.

Those who took or threatened legal action are seen as having gone "outside the system," as having "broken the rules," and they appear to be perceived as threatening to the system and as people who should "pay for their transgressions." They may have gotten the position for which they pressed, but the system has a long memory and does not intend to make the same "mistake" again.

The females who chose this route have paid the price for doing so, and each of the three is talking about where they can go from here.

All of the 7 females in the work hard, work smart and make it happen group are advocates of females in administration, and are critically aware of discrimination against and barriers to the advancement of females in their school systems and in educational administration generally. Those who threatened or took legal action, are much more overtly vocal in their advocacy and see it as necessary to push the cause of females in administration at every opportunity. One subject reflected, "Women don't help women enough. I have to keep reminding them that it's our job." Those who got their positions without resort to legal action or the threat of it, are no less advocates, but they speak about advocacy in a little different way. They talk about skill and savvy, and using strategies to make it happen; and they focus on what they can do to make it happen. They are less overtly vocal, but just as dedicated. They report being involved in mentoring and sponsoring other females in their district. One principal asserted, "My job is to bring some other women along. I think I owe it." A superintendent argued, "There are few female administrators and few openings, but we slit our own throats if we don't promote women."

While the two sets of individuals differed somewhat in how they dealt with their advocacy of females, they were in agreement that in general, females do not support other females. They felt that, in the words of one subject, "females are critical of other females, more critical than of males, and more open in their criticism." One subject saw "jealousy from other women" as a major problem for women. For all of them, the absence of a network of agreement amongst women to support each other and be an effective counterforce to the "good old boys," was seen as a major impediment to the advancement of females in administration.

CONCLUSIONS

The study focused on females who had been successful in securing male-dominated line administrative positions, high school principal and superintendent of schools. It sought to learn how they had succeeded and it attended to their "voices," i.e., what they said about it' how they perceived it. We found two basically different messages in their perceptions. One, <u>work hard, be loyal and you will be rewarded</u>, and they did and were. The second, <u>work hard, work smart and make it happen</u>, and they did and were successful; some more than others. All were successful in attaining the male-dominated line administrative positions they sought. That was a given of the study. However, the two groups see the route to success differently, and act accordingly. Their perceptions have important consequences for how they act with

other administrators in their school system, particularly males, and for their views about sex discrimination in school administration and advocacy of females.

A larger number of females (10) fit into the work hard, be loyal and you will be rewarded group. They tended not to be advocates of other females and to discount the influence of discrimination against females in educational administration. A smaller number of females (7) fit into the work hard, work smart and make it happen group. Some of them were and are extremely successful (4), some of them got the position but are now dead ended (3), but all of them tend to be vigorous advocates of other females and to recognize the discrimination against females in educational administration. Females who aspire to positions in administration decry what they perceive to be the lack of support for females from other females (Edsen, 1988). Given the larger number of females who take the first position, it may not be a surprising perception, and it may well be the case.

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